

Five Steps to a Successful Sabbatical
Chris Tachibana, Fe. 1, 2013, *Science Magazine*

Reconfiguring a professional and personal life takes serious planning. Here are five pointers from professors with recent sabbatical experience.

University life can be a grind of teaching, grant writing, and department politics. But every seven years, faculty members get a magical opportunity that is coveted by nonacademics: sabbatical leave. In this period of career development, a professor might learn new techniques, expand a research program, or finish off that book or pile of languishing manuscripts. The dream starts with meticulous advanced planning, but ends best for those who are adaptable and open-minded. Here are five pointers from professors with recent sabbatical experience.

Go for it

A sabbatical leave can mean interrupting your research, getting paid less, and disrupting family life. But ask professors if their sabbatical was worth the effort and they answer with one voice: yes. Go all the way, they say. Take a full year and go to a new city or country, if you can.

Why? New environments, fresh perspectives, and unfamiliar routines boost your creativity. **Robert Austin** offers personal and empirical evidence. In 10 years he has held faculty positions at Harvard and Copenhagen Business Schools, and is now dean of business administration at the University of New Brunswick, Canada. He says, “Being out of your ordinary surroundings makes you establish new relationships and collaborations and lets you present your ideas in a different context.” People in other countries or even other institutes view your work from a different perspective, informed by the prevailing models and cultures of their region, he says. “They give you reactions and feedback that are different from your colleagues at home.” Austin’s research shows that groundbreaking ideas can develop when unexpected events—accidents—happen to people with the expertise to recognize potential innovations. Being in a new situation invites these serendipitous events.

Get away (at least mentally)

A sabbatical can be revitalizing. A 2010 study (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20718526) compared faculty members at 10 universities in Israel, New Zealand, and the United States who did and did not take sabbatical leave. People who had a sabbatical had better self-reported scores for life satisfaction, stress, and other measures of well-being than those who did not. The secret to achieving benefits was detachment: escaping the usual routine and being left alone by the home institution.

“The trick to a sabbatical is getting away from things that you find stressful,” says **Paul Spector**, professor of organizational psychology at the University of South Florida, and an author on the study. “Don’t just do the same work somewhere else.” At the University of New

Brunswick, Austin advises his own faculty members to leave campus for their sabbaticals, “although I say this at some risk as a dean, because they might not come back.”

People with children and working spouses might find this advice impractical, but **Glenn Starkman**’s entire family came along on his sabbatical. He is a professor of physics and astronomy at Case Western Reserve University, currently working at CERN in Switzerland, site of the Large Hadron Collider. The family knew about life abroad from earlier years at Oxford and CERN, and Starkman said they thought carefully about how to get the most out of their opportunity. His wife, Debby Rosenthal, is a literature professor who planned a sabbatical at the same time. They lured their teenage children with promises of the world’s best cheese and chocolate, and the chance to experience a different culture and language but attend school in English. Fortunately, CERN contributes to tuition at an international school, which Starkman says “brings the cost [down] to merely expensive.” Planning a sabbatical abroad takes time. Especially if you are taking your family, says Starkman, expect two rather unproductive transition months. The payoff? “You’ll gain nine or 10 very productive months, and it’ll all be worth it.”

Paul Spector took his own advice about getting away when he took a sabbatical without leaving town. “I had a young kid, so I stayed home for eight months and worked. I didn’t go to the office, I told my colleagues I’d be away, and they left me alone.” Spector told his graduate students in advance to not schedule their defense during his sabbatical. He used his time for professional development that he had been putting off. “I spent a week learning about logistic regression,” he says, “because it was something I wanted to learn but never had time before. I had a great eight months and came back recharged.”

Start planning, now

Reconfiguring a professional and personal life takes serious planning. Sabbaticalhomes.com can help with relocation. Meet with your university’s human resources department to find out how a leave will affect paychecks, taxes, and benefits, advises a blog at The Chronicle of Higher Education (chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/author/nhighberg). Since many universities reduce salary during sabbaticals, look for funding opportunities, but start early. Applications for government and foundation grants such as Fulbright or Guggenheim fellowships are due more than a year before funding starts. Finally, tell your institution what other resources you need. Universities realize that sabbaticals promote recruitment and retention, so they want to help.

The University of North Carolina (UNC) Department of Medicine gave **Michael Pignone**, chief of general internal medicine, a physician’s assistant to support his six-month visit to the University of Sydney, Australia in 2010. After working alongside Pignone for several months, the assistant managed Pignone’s primary care patients while he was gone. Pignone’s sabbatical project was part of a five-year National Institutes of Health (NIH) Established Investigator grant and was also funded by an Australian-American Health Policy fellowship. Pignone says the formal applications made him start thinking about his sabbatical about three years in advance.

“They forced me to plan ahead, and I’m glad I did that,” he says. He arranged his administrative and mentoring responsibilities to avoid major decisions, grants, or activities while he was away.

Pignone’s school-age children and his wife Lisa Fail, who could work remotely, went along and had a great time. He says going to an English-speaking country and returning in June, as summer vacation was starting, made the transition easier for his family. If you’re making the effort to go to another country, consider a full year, he says, because “honestly, six months went by pretty fast.”

Professors at small colleges can also get NIH support through the Academic Research Enhancement Award (AREA, or R15) program, which supports biomedical and behavioral sciences research at educational institutions that do not have large NIH grants. National Science Foundation funding is another option. **Rebecca Whelan**, a newly tenured chemistry/biochemistry associate professor at Oberlin College in Ohio, which has 3,000 undergraduates, received an R15 grant for her sabbatical. Whelan is developing new cancer tests based on synthetic DNA molecules that bind to a specific target. To develop the assays, she needed two resources not available at Oberlin: specific ovarian cancer cell lines and a flow cytometer to test binding to the cells. “Flow cytometry is the type of technology that requires a core facility,” says Whelan. “It’s just not something we have at Oberlin.”

Detailed, advanced planning drove the success of Whelan’s sabbatical. She had to develop her idea, line up a host lab, and submit a grant proposal in time to receive funding during her planned leave. Her advice: “Begin thinking strategically two or three years ahead to get funding and establish a relationship with the lab where you’ll spend your sabbatical.”

To find a host lab, Whelan cold-called (or rather, e-mailed) a researcher she cited often in her publications but hadn’t met. Manish Patankar, associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology at University of Wisconsin-Madison said Whelan’s sabbatical proposal caught his eye because it was clear, complete, and within the scope of his main research program, but with a different angle and a new approach. It was the beginning of a fruitful collaboration. Back in her Oberlin lab, Whelan has enthusiastic undergraduates advancing the project and continues working with Patankar. “We’re writing a manuscript with one or two in the pipeline,” she says, “and we’re working on getting Oberlin students to the University of Wisconsin for a summer.” Patankar urges professors at large universities to consider sabbatical requests from motivated researchers from small colleges. He says, “A place like Oberlin is small only in terms of student population. They have some really nice resources and research.”

Both Whelan and Pignone reiterate the importance of getting away. “Most of us are conscientious and want to participate in our department, so we’ll always be pulled back,” says Whelan. But she recommends protecting your time and setting a high threshold for participating in meetings. “I did a phone conference for a tenure case in our department, but I let all the other stuff slide by,” she says. “You don’t have to physically get away, but you must get away mentally.” If you think you could be persuaded to return to your home institution, make it hard to travel back. Pignone said being in Australia, nearly a full day’s travel from North Carolina, was an advantage. Flying back was simply impractical.

If you are in the European Union or an associated country or arranging a sabbatical there, Marie Curie Actions offer a variety of fellowship opportunities. Although known as an excellent source of postdoctoral funding, the fellowships can also support established investigators as visiting scientists. **Michal Feldman**, an associate professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is visiting the Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences on a Curie grant. She offers this advice: The application for her International Outgoing Fellowship was complex, she says, so plan ahead. You'll need details about your research plan, your collaborative arrangement, and the facilities at the institute you will be visiting. In addition, you must describe the larger goals of your fellowship and how you intend to achieve them. The application requires a complete description of your collaborator's research and mentoring achievements, so Feldman says, "work with someone who is well respected in the field."

Expect the unexpected

From the other side of their sabbatical, professors say that although some people accomplish everything they propose—developing methods, publishing manuscripts, and writing books—many find that their plan simply isn't feasible. Be flexible and be ready to change the project if necessary, or even better, if something more interesting comes along. University of New Brunswick's Robert Austin says, "It's exceeding unlikely that your sabbatical project will proceed exactly as planned, but be open-minded and you'll see opportunities for collaborations and other sources of value that you didn't see going into your sabbatical."

Even Whelan, whose project went as planned, had unexpected scientific benefits from working at a new institution. After a colleague mentioned the university's high throughput sequencing equipment, she used the facilities to enhance her research by characterizing the most successful DNA molecules from her screen. Some professors advise building flexibility into a research plan from the start. Propose a practical project that you know you can accomplish, to ensure that you get something done, but also work on something risky—that's the point of a sabbatical.

Can't do it? Let them come to you

If you simply can't get away, consider hosting a sabbatical professor. Manish Patankar, Whelan's host at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, didn't take a sabbatical when he earned tenure a few years ago, but says his research program benefited when a sabbatical came to him in the form of Whelan's visit. "She brought in skills and techniques we didn't have in the lab," he says. Whelan's analytical chemistry background unexpectedly came in handy when she performed gas chromatography analysis on anticancer compounds the Patankar lab is exploring. Says Patankar, "You never know where things will go."

The positive effects of a visiting scientist can ripple beyond your research group. **Lyndal Trevena**, an associate professor at the Sydney school of public health, University of Sydney, hosted Pignone on his sabbatical leave from UNC, and says his work had national impact. Pignone and his Sydney colleagues did a cost-effectiveness study on colorectal cancer screening in Australia. Trevena says that being on sabbatical, without teaching and administrative duties,

meant Pignone could focus intensely on the project, including traveling to the capital of Canberra to talk to people in the government. Being an outside expert also gave extra weight to his perspective. All this raised the profile of their work, says Trevena. “The study has really been influential for advancing a program for colorectal cancer screening in Australia,” she says.

One of the study coauthors was Professor **Kirsten Howard**. Before Pignone arrived in her department, she knew of his work, but had never met him. Howard and Pignone quickly discovered common interests in shared decision-making—studying how patients and physicians can cooperatively make informed health care decisions. They now make up a forceful collaborative team, with Pignone contributing clinical expertise and Howard developing the health economics methods for two projects funded by grants they applied for while Pignone was in Australia. Howard’s department supported her own sabbatical the next year to UNC. To encourage the type of informal interactions that can develop into new scientific partnerships, Howard suggests integrating visiting scientists as much as possible into the department. She says, “Attending seminars, research presentations, and student talks creates chance encounters and conversations that can lead to spin-off collaborations and new research directions.”

Trevena recommends hosting a sabbatical professor whose work fits well with your research program. Then, make the most of every minute. The visit goes by quickly, she says, so squeeze as much time as possible with your visitor into your already busy schedule. She says, “You’ll see that you can really do some meaty, productive work in that time and cement a collaboration.”

Additional Resources

- Australian-American Health Policy Fellowship - www.commonwealthfund.org/Fellowships/Australian-American-Health-Policy-Fellowships.aspx
- Fulbright Program - www.cies.org/Fulbright
- Guggenheim Foundation - www.gf.org
- Marie Curie Actions - ec.europa.eu/research/mariecurieactions/index_en.htm
- National Institutes of Health - grants.nih.gov
- National Science Foundation - www.nsf.gov
- Nels Highberg sabbatical blog - chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/author/nhighberg
- Sabbatical Homes - sabbaticalhomes.com